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Hammer And Nail Naomi Shihab Nye

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Naomi Shihab Nye

HAMMER AND NAIL

"Would you like to see where our little girl is buried?" my friend asks as we walk between stucco shrines and wreaths of brilliant flowers. Even a plane's propeller is attached to a pilot's grave as if the whole thing might spin off into the wind. One man's relatives built a castle over his remains, with turrets and towers, to match the castle he built for his body in life. If you stand at a certain angle you can see both castles at once, the bigger one he lived in off on the horizon. An archway says in Spanish, "Life is an illusion. Death is the reality. Respect the dead whom you are visiting now." We hike down the hill toward the acres of "free graves." Here people can claim any space they want without paying, but also risk having someone buried on top of them. In the fields beyond the cemetery, women walk slowly with buckets slung over their shoulders on poles. Black cows graze on knee-high grass. The crossbar from the marker to my friend's child's grave has come loose and lies off to one side. My friend kneels, pressing the simple blue crossbar back into the upright piece, wishing for a hammer and nail. The cross has delicate scalloped edges and says nothing. No words, no dates. It reminds me of the simplicity of folded hands, though I know there were years of despair. My friend says, "Sometimes I am still very sad. But I no longer ask, 'What if...?' It was the tiniest casket you ever saw." On the small plots in either direction, families have stuck tall pine branches into dirt. The needles droop, completely dried by now, but they must have looked lovely as miniature forests for the first few days.